

Savage Minds Occasional Papers No. 6

Culture In The Melting-Pot

By Edward Sapir

Edited and with an introduction by Alex Golub

First edition, 9 November, 2013



Savage Minds Occasional Papers

1. The Superorganic by Alfred Kroeber, edited and with an introduction by Alex Golub
2. Responses to “The Superorganic”: Texts by Alexander Goldenweiser and Edward Sapir, edited and with an introduction by Alex Golub
3. The History of the Personality of Anthropology by Alfred Kroeber, edited and with an introduction by Alex Golub
4. Culture and Ethnology by Robert Lowie, edited and with an introduction by Alex Golub
5. Culture, Genuine and Spurious by Edward Sapir, edited and with an introduction by Alex Golub
6. Culture in the Melting-Pot by Edward Sapir, edited and with an introduction by Alex Golub

Copyright information



This original work is copyright by Alex Golub, 2013. The author has issued the work under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 United States license.

You are free

- to **share** - to copy, distribute and transmit the work
- to **remix** - to adapt the work

Under the following conditions

- **attribution** - you must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author
- **noncommercial** - you may not use this work for commercial purposes
- **share alike** - if you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same or similar license to this one

This work includes excerpts from

Sapir, Edward. 1916. Culture in the melting-pot. The Nation Supplement. December 21:1-2.

This work is in the public domain. The author has taken care to respect the rights of all copyright holders and welcomes communications regarding the copyright status of this work. Please contact him at golub@hawaii.edu.

Introduction

What would it mean to have a uniquely, authentically American culture? One free from its roots in Europe and anchored in the lived reality of Americans? This is just as pressing a question when Edward Sapir addressed it in 1916 as it is in today's era of reactionary conservatism. But in truth, the points raised in Sapir's brief comment are relevant to any settler colony, and hence is of interest far beyond the United States.

"Culture in the Melting-Pot" is hardly Sapir's definitive answer to this question. Rather, his full treatment of this topic is his paper "Culture, Genuine and Spurious" (SMOPS #5). Instead, "Culture in the Melting-Pot" is one Sapir's earliest attempts to combine anthropology with cultural criticism. In it, he responds to a piece by John Dewey (a leading thinker and philosopher of education) which itself deals with these topics. I've chosen to republish this short piece because it is difficult to find (it has been reprinted only once since 1916, in the very important but prohibitively expensive *Collected Works of Edward Sapir*); it is a lovely little piece that deserves a wider readership; and finally, because Sapir demonstrates the relevance of Boasian anthropology to contemporary political debates, he provides a nice illustration of the main 'theoretical moves' that Boasians make.

Contra Dewey, Sapir insists that it is wrong to assume that European culture must be extirpated from American lifeways in order to produce an authentic American culture. Culture traits, he emphasizes, flow across political borders, and are rarely congruent with them (Ira Bashkow's article on Boasian concepts of culture boundaries (2004) is excellent on this point). It is wrong to assume that one nation equals one culture.

For this reason, Sapir argues, creating a genuinely American culture would be part of a wider project of reforming the entire culture area America is embedded in -- the "Occidental world" as Sapir calls it. It would, for instance, mean supplanting English as the primary language of Americans. It is hard to tell whether Sapir find such a radical project congenial (as many would today) or believes its scope signals its impracticality.

Just as national boundaries are not coterminous with cultural boundaries, so too does Sapir argue against the idea that nations are not 'organisms' whose parts are functionally connected. This is in stark contrast to structure functionalism, which makes just the opposite assumption. The explanation for a culture trait, says Sapir, is the history that produced it and not its function in society. For this reason, we should not insist that culture 'adapt' to industrialism. If anything, Sapir seems to think it should be the other way around. Like Weber, Sapir believes that the growth of culture is the result of a complex history of interacting factors, and is suspicious of 'monistic' worldviews that reductively see one aspect of reality (genetics, the environment, the mode of production) as the cause of all the others.

In the end, then, Sapir does not believe that America will develop a culture free of external influences. He does not believe the development of an American culture will happen automatically. His vision for America is one of, if not shreds and patches, a messy process of diffusion, integration, and (perhaps) functional coherence.

In conclusion, I should say that there is a lot not to like about Sapir's arguments. Like those of other intellectuals in the period, it seems completely impossible to him that a uniquely American culture could involve the influence of Native Americans -- something that seems particularly jarring given his own extensive work with Indians. Just as his arguments are relevant

to today's arguments, so too are his exclusions still with us in public discourse -- an absence that should be noted.

Much has been written about Edward Sapir and I've learned a great deal by the scholars who specialize in his work. In particular, I'd recommend the work of Richard Handler (2005) to those interested in learning more about Sapir as a cultural critic.

This version of "Culture in the Melting Pot" has been transcribed from the original article that appeared in *The Nation*. It has been very lightly edited. I hope that this paper, like the others in this series, will help present early anthropological theory in a form that is accessible to everyone. There is today a tremendous amount of material which is open access, but it is difficult to find, inconvenient to read, and many people do not know where to start looking for it. By curating a selection of important open access work, I hope to make open access resources better known and to raise awareness of the actual history of anthropological theory.

Bibliography

Bashkow, I. 2004. A Neo-Boasian Conception of Cultural Boundaries. *American Anthropologist* 106 (3): 443-458.

Handler, Richard. 2005. *Critics Against Culture: Anthropological Observers of Mass Society*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press.

-R
6 Dec 2013
Honolulu

Culture in the Melting-Pot

Edward Sapir

A paper by Professor Dewey on "American Education and Culture" published in the *New Republic* points to a fundamental conflict between the traditional ideal of culture and the actual conditions of life in America. A multitude of problems are suggested by it, but I will confine myself to a few considerations that have occurred to me in the reading. I beg to be understood as being entirely sympathetic with Professor Dewey's standpoint, i.e., the necessity of humanizing our utilitarian civilization on the basis of a frank acceptance for educational purposes of current modes of thought and action[,] instead of attempting to inject into educational methods the vaccine of discarded classicism. My own remarks are meant as supplementary than corrective.

In the first place, it seems to me that Professor Dewey lays too much stress on the need of a specifically American revision of our ideal of culture. The disparity between tradition and reality is doubtless more glaring on this continent than in Europe, but it is not different in kind. Everywhere education and, in consequence, the ideal of culture are largely concerned with the acquirement of matter and manner which reflect the conditions of past stages, the necessary adjustment of the educational heritage to [the] present conditions [which are] the resultants of industrialism, being largely left to the individual in the course of his contact with the world. Indeed, it would seem that the lack of accord between culture and the demands of modern life is more acute in the case of the English university ideal than in its American correspondent. So far, then, as a thorough revision of our ideals of culture is demanded, the "American" may as well be struck out of Professor Dewey's title.

Professor Dewey may retort that it is not a question of a revision of American ideals, but of their very formation. We cannot revise what we do not possess. "The beginning of a culture stripped of egoistic illusions is the perception that we have as yet no culture: that our culture is something to achieve, to create." What passes under the name of "culture" in America, Professor Dewey might add, is merely Europe's cast-off clothes. Unless I quite misunderstand him, he feels it necessary that America should evolve a distinctive culture of its own, something that could be truly called "American." The readiness with which Americans deplore the lack of specifically American traits in their culture is more than irritating, it is pathetic. It rests partly on an affectation of national modesty (as provincial a pose as the earlier swagger which it has largely replaced among the more educated), partly and more profoundly on a geographical fallacy. America is politically and geographically distinct from the Old World, hence it must needs have a culture of its own. Never mind the fact that our population is almost entirely recruited from the countries of Europe, that it is bound to them by a thousand ties, that there is hardly a single word uttered or idea thought which is not of European origin -- we must fly in the face of fact and build us a brand-new culture. If we are not autochthonous, we must become so. And yet it needs only the most casual survey of culture to teach us that culture is not congruous with political lines, nor immediately determined by environmental conditions, but is strictly dependent on its historical antecedents and on the foreign influences with which it comes into constant contact.

Europe's cast-off clothes are our own, though we may be ashamed of them. Life and thought in Canada are as like life and thought in the United States as one egg to another. German-speaking Austria and Germany have for several centuries formed pretty much of a culture unity, and this in spite of the greatest possible political heterogeneity.

And this leads me to one of the salient points in the "historical antecedents" of a culture. It is the matter of language. We hear much of the psychological foundations of culture (national temperament), of the moulding influence of economic conditions and of social organization, of the compelling force of the physical environment, but how many historians have perceived the overwhelming significance of a community of language? It is too obvious a point to dwell upon, hence its importance is invariably missed. All the great spheres of culture have been and are dominated through the medium of a common language. Give me a group of men whose conversation and speeches I can readily follow and whose thoughts I can identify with my own, and I soon become a participant in their culture. As long as America is English-speaking, its culture must be fundamentally the same as that of England and Canada and Australia, necessarily local modifications notwithstanding. This does not mean that American is condemned to slavish adherence to provincial Anglicisms of thought and habit, but that the culture it shares in is that of the English-speaking world as a whole. It is only when we Americans fully realize this that we shall be able to bring our due influences to bear in the world of science and art. National slogans are of no avail in the development of culture: where they are not justified by the historical nexus of things, they soon become extinct. Is not Walt Whitman's "Americanism" in poetry a merely individual outburst, and is it not highly significant that its formative influence in American culture is practically nil? To summarize, I should say that if we wish to have in American the sort of culture that Professor Dewey dimly foreshadows, it becomes our task not to create an exclusively American product but to join in the work of a general revision of cultural standards of the Occidental world, and more particularly of the English-speaking part of it.

A word in conclusion as to the relations between culture and social and economic conditions. Professor Dewey writes: "I am one of these who think that the only justification of any form of political and economic society is its contribution to art and science -- to what may roundly be called culture." And later on: "In short, our culture must be consonant with realistic science and with machine industry, instead of a refuge from them." My main difficulty is with the conception of art and science as a contribution of a special "form of political and economic society," as though the essential nature of the higher aspects of the culture of a definite time and place were directly traceable to current features of the political and economic organism. This is precisely the method of approach which is most popular, the method of nearly all sociological interpreters of cultural history, the method of *mutatis mutandis* also of psychological interpreters. A society is seen to be characterized by certain aesthetic and intellectual tendencies; what more "obvious" than that their genesis must be sought in the fundamental conditions of life that society? Hence arise countless interpretations -- sociological, economic, psychological -- of any aspect of the life of society you will. They all have this in common, that they conceive of the vast complex of human activities characteristic of a given time and place as constituting a self-contained organism, the significance of any aspect of which becomes clear from a study of all or certain of the others. Historical-minded people always have a stubborn difficulty with this conception, one

that meets them at every step. It may be that society is gradually evolving towards some such exquisite harmony of life and structure. For the present, the student of cultural history humbly notes that no society is or ever was thus self-contained and self-explanatory. Each of the aspects of social life, say philosophy or music or religion, is more determined by its sequential relation to other manifestations of itself in time and place, than by its co-existence with the other aspects of that life. A constant but always very imperfectly consummated tendency is present towards the moulding of these more or less distinct strands into a fabric; countless modifications and adaptations result, but the strands nevertheless remain distinct. In brief, we must allow for distinct levels in cultural history, as we allow for them in psychology. We must beware of being tricked by our inherently monistic habit of mind. To apply these principles to our quest of an American culture, let us not delude ourselves into the belief that a new art and science will somehow develop from a specifically American set of social and economic conditions. The art and science, the culture, of America will, let us hope, be responsive to these conditions; it will not, for all that, be created by them.